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Poverty, labour, and the language of social description in early modern England

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Appearing as a witness before the Canterbury diocese probate court in 1624, Richard Turner, an octogenarian husbandman, was asked for an estimate of his net moveable wealth. He replied that he was ‘just Leane Bacon’ and worth nothing.¹ Turner was responding to a question routinely asked of deponents in the English church courts between the mid-sixteenth and late-seventeenth centuries that enquired about their worth in goods, taking into account all outstanding debts. While his self-assessment as ‘lean bacon’ was a colourful departure from the more formulaic responses often elicited by this question, Turner was not unusual in describing himself as being worth nothing. There were several variants of this type of response, with numerous witnesses simply stating that they were worth nothing, or nothing besides the most basic necessities. Another standard phrase was ‘little or nothing’. Others declared they were ‘little worth’, while some admitted to ‘not much’, ‘no great matter’, or ‘only a little’. In a Yorkshire variant, some deponents declared themselves ‘worth small’. More unusually a few witnesses also chose explicitly to describe themselves—or, in the case of married women, their husbands—as ‘poor’. In particularly antagonistic cases, witnesses could be asked to evaluate each other’s worth or credit as well as their own, often as part of aggressive discrediting strategies, to which assessments the concept of poverty was also often central.

Such responses provide a rare insight into the language of *self*-description adopted by men and women of limited means, of whom there were growing ranks in early modern England. Despite their expanding numbers, as well as intensified social commentary on the problems of poverty, the ‘voices of the poor’ themselves have

I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for a Philip Leverhulme prize which has funded a period of leave, and to the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh for a Visiting Research Fellowship, during which this article was completed. Work in progress on this topic was presented to seminars at the universities of York and Warwick, and at the North American Conference on British Studies in November 2006, and the final version has benefited from participants’ responses. I am also indebted to Dan Beaver, Konstantin Dierks, Steve Hindle, Sarah Knott, Judith Spicksley, and Andy Wood for their comments on earlier drafts.

¹ Canterbury Cathedral Archives [CCA], DCb/PRC 39/38, fo. 48^v.

remained largely muffled, audible only in relation to (and deeply shaped by) the highly strategic negotiations of formal poor relief.² Of course the responses of witnesses to the question of their worth were not unmediated by the courts, but this enquiry was not as critical a moment of negotiation as petitions for relief since the outcome of these causes (the majority of which did not proceed to judgement) mostly did not have a direct bearing on the material well-being of respondents. Nor was the question of worth specific to those seeking relief or deemed ‘poor’, and as a result responses to it afford a far wider perspective on the many gradations at the lower end of the social hierarchy that were arguably as intricate and significant as the categories of gentility that dominated contemporary classification schemes of the social order.³ The many statements of worth supplied by deponents of negligible means shed light on the social identities they ascribed to themselves, and the subtle forms of differentiation they invoked, especially when contrasted with the language of social description adopted by other witnesses in cases when their credibility was disputed.

The question of witnesses’ worth—enquiring after the value of their goods, taking into account all outstanding debts—belonged to a series of ‘interrogatories’ commonly submitted by the party opposing the litigant on whose behalf a witness had been sworn. Administered after a deponent had responded to the principal allegations, interrogatories were designed to test bias both by assessing the weight to be given to each deposition as well as exposing any weaknesses in the case. Contemporary guides to church court practice distinguished between questions that were calculated to examine the ‘sayings’ of witnesses (i.e. the validity of the evidence they recounted) and those designed to evaluate their ‘persons’ (i.e. the creditworthiness of the witnesses themselves), in which latter category the question of worth belonged.⁴ It was often combined with a question about how witnesses maintained themselves which elicited details of how witnesses made a living beyond the basic socio/occupational descriptors that were routinely noted in the biographical preamble to each deposition. Such interrogatories were usually posed indiscriminately to all deponents appearing on behalf of a particular litigant, and were not associated with

² Tim Hitchcock, Peter King and Pamela Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840* (Basingstoke, 1997).

³ David Cressy, ‘Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England’, *Literature and History*, 3 (1976), 29-44.

⁴ Henry Conset, *The Practice of the Spirituall or Ecclesiastical Courts* (London, 1685), pp. 114-15.

specific causes but appeared across the full range of ‘instance’ litigation.⁵ Witnesses were examined under oath, and responses deemed suspect could be subject to further interrogatories on behalf of the opposing litigant. Although witnesses were examined privately their depositions were later published in court, and so declarations of worth in this context did not escape the wider appraisal that was also a routine feature of local rating and assessment and the evaluation of credit. The incentives to dissemble one’s worth were few, and outweighed by the imperative to provide at the very least a broadly credible, if not precisely accurate, account.⁶

Enquiries about witnesses’ worth became increasingly routine from the later sixteenth century, with the rising incidence of this particular interrogatory outstripping the more general expansion of business heard by the church courts between the 1580s and their temporary abolition in the 1640s. The ‘worth’ question reappeared after the courts’ restitution in the 1660s, but its frequency declined quite rapidly thereafter. The following discussion draws on a sample of 13,686 witness statements recorded in response to the question of their worth, collected from a selection of English dioceses, between 1550 and 1728.⁷ Three quarters of these statements were taken during the peak period of litigation between the later-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. Although the majority of witnesses responded with a monetary estimate of their net worth in goods, a significant proportion—amounting to nearly one fifth of the overall sample—referred to what they *lacked* rather than possessed by claiming that they were worth little or nothing or poor. Many of these also declared that they lived by their labour, often eking their maintenance from the economy of makeshifts.

⁵ For a general guide to the business of the church courts, see *The Oxford History of the Laws of England*, vol I: R. H. Helmholz, *The Canon Law and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction from 597 to the 1640s* (Oxford, 2004). The question of deponents’ worth amongst interrogatories was not exclusive to the church courts, but part of civil law procedure more generally—also, for example, included in the proceedings of the university courts and the court of chivalry.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of the accuracy of responses to the question of witnesses’ worth, see Alexandra Shepard and Judith Spicksley, ‘Worth, age and social status in early modern England’ (forthcoming).

⁷ This material has been collected with the aid of a research grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference RES-000-23-1111), and has been collated as a dataset deposited with the UK Data Archive (AHDS History) entitled ‘The “worth” of witnesses in the English church courts, 1550-1728’. The ‘ID’ numbers detailed in subsequent notes refer to cases in this dataset. Witness statements of worth and related biographical material have been extracted from causes heard by the dioceses of Canterbury, Chichester, Chester, Ely, Salisbury and York, the Archdeacons of Lewes and Richmond, and the Cambridge university courts (which adopted the same procedure as the church courts in relation to a wider range of business). I am deeply indebted to Judith Spicksley, Research Associate on this project, for her unstinting assistance in collecting a significant proportion of this material.

Such witnesses were representative of a growing proportion of early modern English society. The impact of a rapidly expanding population on the distribution of resources between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries resulted in burgeoning numbers of landless and land-poor labourers primarily or solely dependent on wages for a living, and the widening incidence of permanent hardship compounded by dramatic inflation.⁸ One of the most visible indicators of such hardship was the local administration of relief that accompanied the evolution of the poor law. Paul Slack has estimated that between 1500 and 1700 there was a fourfold increase in poor relief relative to the total population, and that by 1700 around five per cent of the population were permanently supported by their parish.⁹ It is clear from many local studies that such provision did not even begin to meet need.¹⁰ Those receiving formal relief represented only a fraction of those vulnerable to poverty, leaving it very difficult to assess the extent of the ‘conjunctural’ or ‘marginal’ poor, their experiences of poverty, or their degree of social inclusion.¹¹ Estimates of the proportion of the population enduring material hardship range from between 35 per cent and half of all households in the later seventeenth century.¹² The survival strategies of the extensive ‘penumbra’ of households who did not receive relief, but were exempt from contributing rates towards it, involved a shadowy series of makeshifts the full range of which is difficult to discern.¹³ While it is clear that wage labour must have provided a significant part of their livelihoods, the occupational and

⁸ Keith Wrightson has estimated that as much as half of the English population depended either primarily or solely on wages by the mid-seventeenth century, although other estimates have been more conservative. Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000), p. 197. See also D. C. Coleman, ‘Labour in the English Economy of the Seventeenth Century’, *Economic History Review*, 8:3 (1956), 280-95; L. A. Clarkson, ‘Introduction: Wage-Labour, 1500-1800’, in Kenneth D. Brown, *The English Labour Movement 1700-1951* (Dublin, 1982); Craig Muldrew and Stephen King, ‘Cash, Wages and the Economy of Makeshifts in England, 1650-1800’, in Peter Scholliers and Leonard Schwarz (eds.), *Experiencing Wages: Social and Cultural Aspects of Wage Forms in Europe since 1500* (New York, 2003). For a summary of trends in prices and wages, see C. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500-1700*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1984), I, pp. 41-2, 49, 217-18.

⁹ Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988).

¹⁰ See, for example, Steve King, ‘Poor Relief and English Economic Development Reappraised’, *Economic History Review*, 50:2 (1997), 360-8; L. A. Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law, 1500-1700* (Woodbridge, 2004).

¹¹ For an extensive treatment of these issues, see Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550-1750* (Oxford, 2004).

¹² Tom Arkell, ‘The Incidence of Poverty in England in the Later 17th Century’, *Social History*, 12:1 (1987), 23-47.

¹³ Hindle, *On the Parish?*, p. 4. See also Jeremy Boulton, ‘“It Is Extreme Necessity That Makes Me Do This”: Some “Survival Strategies” of Pauper Households in London’s West End during the Early Eighteenth Century’, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), 47-69; Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (eds.), *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003).

social identities associated with it remain opaque, not least because it was irregular and often seasonal in character and because it spanned a range of activities from agricultural day labour (both skilled and unskilled) to urban journeywork and piece work, work in the service sector, and to manufacture in the putting out system.¹⁴ Although there was an intricately graded hierarchy of skilled and unskilled labour, not to mention the wide range of labouring work that by-passed the market economy, ‘labourers’ were often represented as a homogenous category, principally associated with poverty.¹⁵ More specifically, wage labour remained conceptually indistinct from service in the seventeenth century—and it was this conceptual blurring that contributed to the debate amongst the Levellers in the late 1640s over whether wage-earners should be deemed ‘freemen’ and included in the franchise.¹⁶

While it is clear that poverty and wage dependence increased dramatically over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in a mutually reinforcing relationship, the experiences and identities of the growing numbers of men and women drawn into both therefore remain frustratingly opaque. This matters not only for our estimates of the size and survival strategies of the labouring poor when assessing the nature and pace of early modern economic change, but also for our accounts of social and political change, since (as recent work on state formation has emphasised), social identities were inextricably linked with the exercise and experience of authority in early modern England.¹⁷ The redrawing of local boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that accompanied the socio-economic restructuring of early modern England is associated with the emergence of a ‘middling sort’ as a social

¹⁴ A. Hassell Smith, ‘Labourers in Late Sixteenth-Century England: A Case Study from North Norfolk’, Parts I and II, *Continuity and Change*, 4 (1989), 11-52; 367-94; R. Millward, ‘The Emergence of Wage Labour in Early Modern England’, *Explorations in Economic History*, 18 (1981), 21-39; Donald Woodward, *Men at Work: Labourers and Building Craftsmen in the Towns of Northern England, 1450-1750* (Cambridge, 1995); Jeremy Boulton, ‘Wage Labour in Seventeenth-Century London’, *Economic History Review*, 49:2 (1996), 268-90.

¹⁵ Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1978), ch. 6; Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, ch. 2. See also A. W. Coats, ‘Changing Attitudes to Labour in the Mid-Eighteenth Century’, *Economic History Review*, 11:1 (1958), 35-51.

¹⁶ For key contributions to the historiographical debate over the extent to which the Leveller proposals for electoral reform were socially inclusive see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962); Keith Thomas, ‘The Levellers and the Franchise’, in G. E. Aylmer (ed.), *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement 1646-1660* (London, 1972); Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘The Political Theory of the Levellers: Putney, Property and Professor Macpherson’, *Political Studies*, 24 (1976), 397-422; Quentin Skinner, ‘Rethinking Political Liberty’, *History Workshop Journal*, 61 (Spring, 2006), 156-70. See also Rachel Foxley, ‘John Lilburne and the Citizenship of “Free-Born Englishmen”’, *Historical Journal*, 47:4 (2004), 849-74.

¹⁷ See especially, Michael J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England c.1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000); Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996).

category, and, as the ‘chief inhabitants’ of their parishes, as an interest group increasingly aligned with the ruling elite.¹⁸ Far harder to gauge, however, is the permeability of and level of resistance to such boundaries from below, leading to varying claims about the scope for popular agency in the ‘negotiation of power’—in terms of either participation or active resistance.¹⁹ Exploration of this issue is rendered particularly difficult in the absence of much evidence of how those below the parish elite viewed their place in the social hierarchy.

The inclusion amongst witnesses in the church courts of large numbers who claimed to be of little or no worth, for the most part living by their labour, affords some reflection on labouring identities and the links between social status and authority amongst men and women who were lacking in means or dependent on others for their living. Sufficient numbers claimed to be worth little or nothing to suggest that this was a familiar and recognisable category of social description, yet with enough variation to indicate its association with a subtle hierarchy of intricately graded degrees of difference which clearly mattered in the calibration of social position but which tend to be obliterated by the catch-all category of the ‘labouring poor’ favoured both by contemporary commentary and in historical analysis. While such distinctions might be carefully drawn by witnesses seeking to establish their precise place in the social hierarchy and to resist blunter appraisals of their status (or lack of it), such subtleties were nonetheless readily collapsed and over-ridden by a dominant set of assumptions linking relative poverty with dependence at best and immorality at worst. Although the regular appearance of witnesses of limited means shows that their social and material circumstances were not a bar to participation in the business of the church courts, the negative ways in which their authority could be

¹⁸ Keith Wrightson, ‘Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England’, in Penelope J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991); idem, “‘Sorts of People’ in Tudor and Stuart England”, in Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994); Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c.1550-1640* (Basingstoke, 2000); idem, ‘A Sense of Place? Becoming and Belonging in the Rural Parish, 1550-1650’, in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2000); H. R. French, ‘Social Status, Localism and the “Middle Sort of People” in England 1620-1750’, *Past and Present*, 166 (2000), 66-99; idem., *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England 1600-1750* (Oxford, 2007).

¹⁹ Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001); Michael J. Braddick and John Walter (eds.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society. Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001); Christopher Marsh, ‘Order and Place in England, 1580-1640: The View from the Pew’, *Journal of British Studies*, 44:1 (2005), 3-26; Andy Wood, ‘Fear, Hatred and the Hidden Injuries of Class in Early Modern England’, *Journal of Social History*, 39:3 (2006), 803-26.

debated by others, as well as the lengths some went to nuance and qualify their declarations of limited worth, are illustrative of the barriers to their equal participation with those of more substance. Most apparent are the severe limits to the conceptual space available for the assertion of autonomous identities by labouring men and women, not least because the labour by which they lived was scarcely credited as an asset of any worth. This is more widely indicative of considerable constraints on the social and political accommodation of the burgeoning ranks of the labouring poor.

I.

Variations on the theme of being worth little or nothing by witnesses who chose to elaborate, explain or qualify their self-assessment in these terms enable exploration of its wider connotations and the many subtle gradations it encompassed. Some of these are familiar from the history of poor relief while others extend our perspective on the hierarchies that differentiated the ranks of the labouring poor above the critical dividing line between those in need of some form of charity and those who were able to sustain their grip on a modicum of independence while nonetheless in possession of limited means.

The most conclusive way of detailing little or no worth was with reference to the receipt of alms—ranging from informal gifts and seasonal charity to occasional supplements in cash or kind and weekly doles distributed by the parish—which signalled the very depths of hardship. Several witnesses were at pains to stress that although they had little they did not depend on charity. Mary Aswell, the wife of a Stepney drover, responded in 1697 that she was ‘not worth any thing her debts p[aid] but never did begg, or ask the Charity of strangers by her’. A Wiltshire tailor, believing himself not obliged to respond to the question of his worth when appearing as a witness in 1674, was nonetheless drawn by another interrogatory to declare ‘he thank’s God that he Never yet received releife from the parish, & so long as he is able to work at his trade he hopes he shall not & also that he hath somthing of his owne to

help to Maintaine him'.²⁰ That the receipt of charity was a borderline to be avoided at all costs is also clear from the ways in which witnesses of limited means were discussed by others, since it was not unusual for co-witnesses to describe others as being poor, but not so poor that they received alms or resorted to begging.

It is not therefore surprising that the very few witnesses who did admit to receiving relief often provided explanations to justify their need. A Kentish weaver interrogated about his worth in 1635 replied that 'being a blind man, he is faine to have releefe from the Towne where he dwells, having no estate or meanes els of his owne'.²¹ William Stacy, an octogenarian husbandman, claimed in 1686 that 'haveing about 10 years since a severe Sicknesse, & looseing his wife & daughter, and Strength to labour as formerly he was necessitated to sell much of his goods & hath since been considered by his neighbours & had some Small matter weekly from the parish for some time past', while an elderly widow appearing in the same case responded similarly that 'she hath lived well in her time, but being now old & feebler than heretofore & not so well able to labour hath received in time of Sicknesse & very lately a Small matter from the publick'.²²

References to either informal or formal relief were extremely rare suggesting that alms-takers were not readily recruited as witnesses—which is further underlined by the fact that details of relief were as likely to feature in the discrediting strategies deployed by litigants against their opponents' witnesses as inform acts of self-assessment. When witnesses did detail their own receipt of relief, it was usually because they had been prompted to do so by an interrogatory explicitly designed to elicit such information in addition to the question of their worth. In 1638 a Cheshire widow claimed in response to an enquiry about how she got her living and what she was worth that 'she selleth ale and by that and her own industrie she getteth her liveinge and is worth little her debts paid'. When pushed further by an additional interrogatory, she answered 'shee is worth nothinge but hath a Childe to mainteyne and her self by her worke and neighbours are good unto her and doe bestowe some releefe on her'.²³ Amongst witnesses appearing in Canterbury, a blacksmith who in 1608 declared himself worth little in response to the question of his worth replied to

²⁰ London Metropolitan Archive [LMA], DL/C/245, fo. 297^v [ID London 1506]; Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office, Trowbridge [W&SRO], D1/42/61, fo. 81^{r-v} [ID Salisbury 217].

²¹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/46, fo. 94 [ID Canterbury 4360].

²² W&SRO, D1/42/60, fos. 115, 118 [IDs Salisbury 609, 607].

²³ Cheshire Record Office, Chester [CRO], EDC 5(1638)/61 [ID Chester 728].

another interrogatory that his wife had sometimes received part of the Christmas ‘benevolence’ distributed amongst the ‘poorer sort’ of their parish.²⁴ The receipt of alms—whether formal parish relief or the informal kindness of neighbours—was the surest sign of poverty, therefore, and witnesses either avoided mentioning any such dependence unless explicitly questioned or sought to excuse it on grounds of illness, the burden of providing for young children, or old age.

The absence of any established residence also occasionally surfaced as a mark of indigence that raised the spectre of vagrancy—although such individuals, placed even lower on the social scale than the settled poor, were even more unlikely to be called as witnesses.²⁵ William Ellyson, a London sawyer, was accounted in 1563 ‘a verie pore and neadie fellowe and one who hathe no certaine dwellinge place’, and in 1637 Ann Richardson was described by a co-witness as ‘a very poore & beggerlye wench [who] hath not any certan place of aboade but sometymes lodges at one place and sometymes at another’.²⁶ Edward Ballard, a labourer from Hawkherst (Kent) who declared himself worth little in 1621, was likewise discounted as ‘but a pore needy fellowe [with] noe certen place of abroad’ who lived separately from his wife ‘because the parishe is loath she should come thither for charginge the parishe’. His co-witnesses conceded that one of the reasons Ballard had no permanent dwelling (besides his poverty) was that no parishioner was willing to lodge him on account of his ‘noisome or sore leg’ and so he was forced to lodge in outhouses, barns or ox-stalls, but his lack of a permanent dwelling still cast doubt over his credibility.²⁷ Co-witnesses of Thomas Humfrey, described as ‘a poore man’, were less forgiving of the fact that he did not live with his wife and children ‘as hee ought to doe’, describing him as a ‘loose liver’ and one who flew ‘up & downe from place to place’.²⁸ By contrast Nicholas Bean, who described himself in 1615 as ‘a labouringe man...lyvinge by his day Labour’ and judged himself worth £6 13s. 4d., was endorsed

²⁴ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/29, fo. 212 [ID Canterbury 2650]. See also ID 2490 in the same case: ‘she hath the benevolence of divers gents of the parishe of Halden articulate at good times of the yere as other poore woomen have’.

²⁵ For contemporary anxieties about vagrants, see A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London, 1985); William C. Carroll, *Fat King, Lean Beggar: Representations of Poverty in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca, 1996); Paul Griffiths, ‘Overlapping Circles: Imagining Criminal Communities in London, 1545-1645’, in Shepard and Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England*. See also Paul A. Slack, ‘Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598-1664’, *Economic History Review*, 27:3 (1974), 360-79.

²⁶ Guildhall Library, London [GL], 9065A/1a, fo. 20^v [ID London 58]; 9065A/7 (unpaginated), 27 Sept 1637.

²⁷ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/35, fos. 37-38^v [ID Canterbury 57].

²⁸ WSRO, Ep II/5/16, fos. 8^v, 15.

by his co-witnesses as ‘noe pore man’ but a householder in Ringwould (Kent) who by his own good husbandry and endeavour had purchased the house he lived in and maintained his family ‘in good sort’.²⁹

Another signifier of limited means more commonly adopted by witnesses describing themselves as well as others was the possession of nothing more than a set of clothes. Several witnesses claimed to be worth little or nothing besides their clothes, suggesting ambiguity about the status of clothes as assets and the limited worth of those for whom clothes were their only goods. When deployed by married women such responses may have represented claims to the only goods they were entitled to own under the rules of coverture, rather than statements of direct hardship. Clothes were exempt from the common law dictate that, on marriage, a woman’s personal estate became her husband’s. It was customary amongst married women appearing as witnesses in Canterbury to stress this distinction—so a gardener’s wife declared in 1642 that she was ‘a married wife and soe during her husbands life worth little or nothings besides her wearinge apparell’.³⁰ It is likely that the clothes to which some married women laid claim were a genuine asset. One Kentish wife referred not only to the apparel in her possession but also to her ‘Jewels or ringes’.³¹ Clothing could represent a sizeable investment: a Cambridge woman who claimed to be worth ‘notheinge of hir selfe’ while married to a draper, later left clothes valued at £10 when she died as a widow.³²

In the case of most witnesses who spoke of being worth little or nothing more than their clothes, however, clothes represented a negligible commodity and as a sole asset they indicated an acute lack of resources. When Anne Hewett, a singlewoman of Tonge (Kent), declared herself worth £6 in 1628, she added (as if to discount it) ‘but it is all in her wearing apparell besides which shee is worth very litle or nothing’.³³ The few other witnesses who gave monetary estimates of the value of their clothes exposed even more limited means. A Yorkshire tiler claimed in 1571 he was worth nothing ‘save onlie the clothes of his backe which he estemeth to be worth iis.’, while

²⁹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/32, fo. 227 [ID Canterbury 2894], DCb/PRC 39/33, fo. 306, DCb/PRC 39/34, fo. 68^{r-v}.

³⁰ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/48, fo. 240 [ID Canterbury 4616]. Approximately one in ten wives appearing in Canterbury responded in these terms. The only other jurisdiction surveyed here in which such statements featured was the Cambridge university courts.

³¹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/48, fo. 19 [ID Canterbury 4514].

³² Cambridge University Library [CUL], Cambridge University Archives [CUA], Comm.Ct.II.10, fo. 25^v [ID Cambridge 143]; Inventory of Helen Browne, 1616/17.

³³ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/41, fo. 101^v [ID Canterbury 3879].

in 1624 a Kentish husbandman stated he was ‘worth noe more then the Clothes on his back and they [were] not worth above 5s.’³⁴ To have to fall back on such limited means signified a precarious existence which inspired wariness in the courts. A butcher whose relative poverty was debated by his co-witnesses (and who left no self-assessment of his worth) was described by other witnesses as a poor man because he sometimes laid his clothes to pawn, and was deemed to be worth little or nothing and of small credit amongst his neighbours.³⁵ Clothes may have been vital assets in the economy of makeshifts, functioning as a form of currency when cash was short, but they were clearly of negligible significance to the assessments of worth taken in court.³⁶ To possess nothing more designated the severe limits of a witness’s worth.

Clothes remained an important gauge of social status well into the seventeenth century and beyond, and witnesses judged either over-dressed for their station or inadequately clad were considered suspect. It was not uncommon for deponents to be asked if they appeared in their own clothes. Litigants might also resort to discrediting tactics that drew attention to the shabbiness of certain witnesses’ clothes. Witnesses in a cause heard in York in 1589 were asked whether Jane Brandon (a 58 year-old widow, also called to give evidence) was a vagrant and ‘not worth in her goods her debtes paid xls. xxxs. xxs. xs. vs. nor *id.* besides her apparell being verie badd and Ragged’. Brandon declared herself worth nothing besides her clothes and confessed to living in Wakefield churchyard for lack of any more permanent residence.³⁷ James Peckett, a Yorkshire butcher, answering a series of questions in 1687 about his own credit sought to defend himself from similar accusations by declaring that his dress was ‘not like a begger’—again emphasising that key boundary—but ‘such as other honest ordinary men are satisfyed with’.³⁸

If clothes were considered a negligible asset, generally discounted from the evaluation of moveable goods and often used to gauge the lack rather than possession

³⁴ Borthwick Institute, York [BI], CP.G.1511, Marmaduke Atkynson c. John Richardson [ID York 156]; CCA, DCb/J/X.11.12, fo. 181^v [ID Canterbury 1202].

³⁵ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/31, fos. 145, 146^v.

³⁶ Sarah Lloyd, “‘Agents in Their Own Concerns’? Charity and the Economy of Makeshifts in Eighteenth-Century Britain”, in King and Tomkins (eds.), *The Poor in England*. See also Lynn MacKay, ‘Why They Stole: Women in the Old Bailey, 1779-1789’, *Journal of Social History*, 32 (Spring, 1999), 623-39. For the extent of the market in second hand clothes, see Beverly Lemire, ‘Consumerism in Preindustrial and Early Industrial England: The Trade in Secondhand Clothes’, *Journal of British Studies*, 27:1 (1988), 1-24; eadem, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c. 1600-1900* (Manchester, 2005), ch. 4.

³⁷ BI, HCCP.1589/2, Office c. John Frieston and Margery Sheppard [ID York 19].

³⁸ BI, CP.H.5746, Dorothy Peckett c. Edward Peckett [ID York 1380].

of resources, the same was true of wages. So a household servant, appearing in Canterbury in 1567, responded to the question of her worth that she was ‘a pore mayd having nothing but her personal apparell and xvis. a year wages and a peticote and noe other goods’.³⁹ Several witnesses replied in this vein—that they were worth little more than they worked for or nothing besides their wages or what they got in service. A servant in husbandry appearing in Salisbury responded in 1590 that he was a ‘poore hired servant & liveth onely by his hard labour not being otherwise any thing worth’, while another examined by the Archdeaconry of Lewes in 1601 declared similarly that he lived by his wages and otherwise was ‘litle worthe’.⁴⁰ Likewise, a Yorkshire maid responded in 1668 that she was ‘a yonge woman and lives by her hand labour & diligence in service & hath little else to live on, but Gods blesseings upon her endeavors’.⁴¹ While such responses were common amongst servants, many other witnesses also spoke in these terms. A sawyer’s wife appearing in Canterbury declared that her husband was a poor man who lived by his labour and had ‘nothing els to stick to’, while a blacksmith’s wife responded that ‘she and her husband be labouringe people and have nothings but what they gett by their owne labor’.⁴² Several widows responded similarly, such as Alice Browne who declared ‘she is worth little thinge but what she earnes at her fingers end’.⁴³ Men with a range of stated occupations besides labourer gave comparable answers, including weavers, blacksmiths, gardeners, tailors, scriveners, a papermaker, ropemaker, seafarer, currier and shoemaker.

Several husbandmen also described themselves in this way, and it is clear from statements about how they maintained themselves that a high proportion of men designated husbandmen were in fact primarily dependent on wage labour and that this did not constitute an asset in court. Daniel Johnson, for example, claimed in 1629 to be ‘little worth living altogether by his labour’.⁴⁴ Of 365 ‘husbandmen’ who both gave statements of worth and provided details of how they got a living, 44.1% declared they lived by their labour—answering in the same terms as the majority of

³⁹ CCA, DCb/J/X.10.15, fo. 170^v [ID Canterbury 737].

⁴⁰ W&SRO, D1/42/11, fo. 42^v [ID Salisbury 743]; West Sussex Record Office, Chichester [WSRO], Ep II/5/6, fo. 263 [ID Chichester 267].

⁴¹ BI, CP.H.2718, Thomas Burton c. Thomas Fletcher [ID York 1527].

⁴² CCA, DCb/PRC 39/42, fo. 246^v [ID Canterbury 4038]; DCb/PRC 39/38, fo. 89^v [ID Canterbury 3469].

⁴³ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/37, fo. 162^v [ID Canterbury 3391].

⁴⁴ WSRO, Ep II/5/13, fo. 48 [ID Chichester 670].

those actually designated ‘labourer’.⁴⁵ The proportions of husbandmen who stated they lived by their labour varied significantly between jurisdictions and were far higher in the south and east than in the north: nearly 70% of husbandmen appearing in the diocese of Chichester and Archdeaconry of Lewes stated they lived by their labour, as did nearly 50% in the diocese of Salisbury and one third in Canterbury, whereas only 4.2% of husbandmen giving details of their maintenance before the diocese of Chester and Archdeaconry of Richmond referred to depending on their labour and none did so in York. This is partly reflective of the vagaries of occupational description and variations in the social diversity of witnesses called before the courts: the term ‘labourer’ was a far more common descriptor in York (applied to 4.8% of deponents) than in Chichester and Lewes (applied to 0.3% of deponents).⁴⁶ But it is also undoubtedly related to the nature and pace of agrarian change in the south east which saw the consolidation of larger holdings by yeomen and a few wealthier husbandman and the growing dependence of smaller subsistence farmers on wage labour as either supplementary income or, amongst those squeezed off the land, their sole source of maintenance.⁴⁷

In a few cases, living by one’s labour did not preclude some degree of substance claimed in response to the question of a witness’s worth, and in many such instances the ‘labour’ involved referred more broadly to work performed independently of wage relations. Just over five per cent of witnesses stating they depended upon their labour for a living declared themselves worth more than £20. Amongst the numerous Sussex husbandmen claiming to live by their labour, seven stated that they were worth £20—close to the mean worth of their occupational group which was £20.26—and it is possible that these men laboured for subsistence by depending upon a smallholding and stock rather than another’s pay. Yet two fifths of the Sussex husbandmen who declared they lived by their labour estimated their worth

⁴⁵ Over three quarters of labourers who provided details of their maintenance confirmed that they lived by their labour.

⁴⁶ These differences are also partly shaped by the frequency with which information about witnesses’ maintenance was solicited: in York, this occurred in only 3.3% of all cases in which witnesses were also asked about their worth, whereas in Chichester and Lewes 35.1% of witnesses who gave statements of worth were asked how they maintained themselves. Proportions in the other jurisdictions surveyed here ranged from 4.4% in Canterbury, to 18.4% in Cambridge and Ely, 21.4% in Salisbury, 24.8% in Chester and Richmond, and 35.3% in London. For pioneering work using such statements as evidence of married women’s work, see Peter Earle, ‘The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, *Economic History Review*, 42:3 (1989), 328-53.

⁴⁷ Joan Thirsk, ‘The Farming Regions of England’, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 8 vols (Cambridge, 1967-2000), IV: 1560-1640, ed. Joan Thirsk. See also eadem, ‘Agriculture in Kent, 1540-1640’, in Michael Zell (ed.), *Early Modern Kent, 1540-1640* (Woodbridge, 2000).

at forty shillings or below or claimed to be worth little or nothing. Of all the witnesses depending on their labour for their maintenance, over 40% also declared themselves worth little or nothing or described themselves as poor, and a further 11.4% evaluated their worth in goods at forty shillings or less. In the discussion of certain witnesses by others, labouring for a living was also associated at best with highly limited means, if not acute hardship. So Edmund Powell, a Sussex labourer, was described in 1620 by a fellow witness as ‘a poore needy fellow’ who had ‘nothing to live uppon but his labour’.⁴⁸ In 1613 Joan Hall, a Kentish widow who spun for her living was represented by several co-witnesses as a poor woman living only by her labour—with which description she concurred.⁴⁹ Katherine Jones, a domestic servant in London who declared she was worth nothing but what she worked for, was similarly portrayed in 1687 as ‘poore and indigent haveing nothing to maintaine herself and child with but the labour of her handes’.⁵⁰

Dependence upon labour was therefore closely linked with the absence of any other more concrete assets. To lack goods was another key signifier of relative poverty since to be without any such resources signalled the absence of either a secure living or any form of credit beyond that associated with charitable obligation to the honest poor.⁵¹ So a Sussex farmer characterised several of his co-witnesses in 1580 as ‘verie poore ffolkes and of small reputacions amonge their neighboures for he knoweth not of anie goods they have to lyve on’, while a Yorkshire husbandman described another witness in 1564 as ‘a verrey poore man and a nedefull [man] having little of his owne propre goods and so reputed named and taken...amongeste his neighboures’.⁵² A lack of goods, necessitating a makeshift living in the absence of any landed income, bred concern. In such formulations, earnings did not figure as a source of security but as the most insubstantial and haphazard form of maintenance. So John Wilson, who in 1571 described himself as a grassman and valued his goods at £3, was discredited by a witness for the opposing party as ‘a very poore man having no goods

⁴⁸ WSRO, Ep II/5/11, fo. 123^v.

⁴⁹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/32, fo. 39^v [ID Canterbury 2833]. For her description by other witnesses, see fos. 37^v, 41^v and 44^v-45.

⁵⁰ LMA, DL/C/242, fos. 69^v, 77 [ID London 1372].

⁵¹ For the extension of credit and forgiving debts as acts of charity, see Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1998), chs. 7, 9.

⁵² WSRO, Ep II/5/1, fo. 1; BI, CP.G.984, Johnson c. Dawson.

of value, but liveth on his occupation of Tailor crafte and by other shifts even from hand to mowth as a poore man and not otherwise'.⁵³

The possession of a limited stock of goods likewise denoted the relative poverty of witnesses, but less acutely than those with nothing more than the clothes they stood up in or the wages they could earn. It is possible to gain an impression of the dividing line between having some small means and being worth little or nothing from the statements of a few witnesses who both described themselves in these terms or as 'poor' and provided monetary estimates of the worth of their goods. Indicative of the steady pressure of inflation, the commonest monetary marker cited in such statements from the mid-sixteenth century was twenty shillings, rising to forty shillings in the early-seventeenth century, and then £5 or £10 from the 1660s. A Kentish husbandman described himself as 'a poore laboring man not worth much above xxs. everie man being paid' in 1566, while a Cambridge widow, who supported herself by carding and spinning, declared in 1581 that she was worth 'little or nothings, scante xxs.'⁵⁴ This twenty shilling limit persisted in the north-east longer than in the south-east, with a Yorkshire cordwainer declaring in 1634 that he was 'a poore old labouring man worth xxs. his debts paide, or thereabouts'.⁵⁵ By contrast, by the 1590s in the Archdeaconry of Lewes forty shillings was more commonly cited. Several husbandmen responded that they were worth little but in order to satisfy the question they valued their goods at forty shillings, with one declaring that his goods were of little value and not worth forty shillings.⁵⁶ A Kentish broad weaver, valuing his goods at forty shillings in 1628, further described himself as 'a poore man' in response to another interrogatory, adding that he took great pains for his living and—again underscoring that critical threshold—that he had never received alms.⁵⁷

The importance of twenty shillings, and later forty shillings, as markers of relative poverty is corroborated by the estimation of several deponents' limited means by their co-witnesses. Discussing the worth of Edward Jerrot and his wife Margaret, a co-witness in the Archbishop of York's consistory claimed in 1575 that they were 'taken for very poore persons not having above xxs. in the whole world ther detts deducted'. This was a relatively optimistic assessment compared with another

⁵³ BI, CP.G. 1512, Margaret Withes c. Thomas Tart and Elizabeth Lemyng. For Wilson's self-evaluation, see CP.G. 1526, Elizabeth Lemyng c. Thomas Tayrte [ID York 264].

⁵⁴ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/5, fo. 111^v [ID 2212]; CUL, CUA, Comm.Ct.II.1, fo. 13.

⁵⁵ BI, CP.H.1978, Office c. churchwardens of St Martin, Micklegate, York [ID York 1103].

⁵⁶ WSRO, Ep II/5/6, fo. 200 [ID Chichester 228]. See also IDs 146, 180, 231, 245.

⁵⁷ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/39, fos. 68^v, 69 [ID Canterbury 3581].

description of them as ‘very poore and bare in substance’ and a further claim that they were ‘not worth in ther goods ther detts paid vs. [for] they are so poore and bare that they have nothing except yt be a bed to lye in’.⁵⁸ In 1606, a Kentish cordwainer who declared himself worth nothing or very little was accounted by co-witnesses as a ‘verie poore man’, one of whom stated that all his goods combined were not worth forty shillings.⁵⁹ Edmund Bolton, a Leeds shearmaker who evaluated his own worth at the substantial sum of £100, described several of his co-witnesses in 1634 as ‘poore needy people not worth xls. their debts payde’, of small estimation amongst their neighbours and to whom little credit should be given, and interrogatories and exceptions from several other York causes also routinely cited forty shillings as the upper limit of a poor person’s goods.⁶⁰ Nearly two thirds of witnesses who described themselves as ‘poor’ and also provided a monetary estimate of their worth did so with reference to either twenty or forty shillings. Over half (56.3%) the witnesses described by others as ‘poor’ who had enumerated the worth of their goods declared a value of forty shillings or less. And as an estimate of worth, forty shillings was cited by 17.9% of witnesses providing a monetary evaluation of their goods, and was the most commonly claimed amount between 1550 and 1624.

It is clear from the frequency with which it was cited, forty shillings held symbolic significance as a marker of some limited means (or, increasingly, the lack of them) and as the threshold between having a modicum of substance and being worth little or nothing. Historically forty shillings has been associated with eligibility for the franchise, in terms of *income* from freehold land. Although the franchise qualification traditionally signified substance, by the early seventeenth century it had diminished considerably in real terms; as Derek Hirst has argued, ‘the mere 40s. freeholder was more or less a pauper’.⁶¹ However, witnesses were referring to their goods rather than income, which were rated far below equivalent amounts of income from land. As a value attached to *goods*, forty shillings was more definitive as a marker of relative poverty. It was acknowledged as a significant boundary by the many church courts

⁵⁸ BI, CP.G 1753, Janet Hall c. Francis Cole. No statement of worth survives from either Jerrot or his wife.

⁵⁹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/28, fos. 179^v, 178, 180 [ID Canterbury 2172].

⁶⁰ BI, CP.H.2000, Jane Pawson c. Ralph Cooke [ID York 1122]. The witnesses concerned claimed to be worth the substantially higher sums of £20, £40, and 20 Marks respectively [IDs York, 1119, 1120, 1121].

⁶¹ Derek Hirst, *The Representative of the People? Voters and Voting in England under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 31.

that, in principle, admitted litigants whose goods were valued below this sum *in forma pauperum*, thus waiving their court fees.⁶² Forty shillings was also the minimum threshold of ‘notable goods’ above which executors and administrators were required by law to obtain probate or letters of administration.⁶³ The jurisdiction of many borough courts was limited to cases of debt involving goods valued at below forty shillings, whereas suits involving more substantial sums were referred to the King’s Bench.⁶⁴ The initial subsidy bill of 1523 (which was the most socially inclusive of the directly assessed subsidies) set the minimum level of goods liable to taxation at forty shillings. Although this was briefly lowered to twenty shillings in the 1540s, for the remainder of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century the lowest minimum threshold was £3.⁶⁵ Another means of contextualising such values is by comparing them with the average value of domestic goods possessed by farm labourers wealthy enough to leave probate inventories, which, according to Alan Everitt’s findings, ranged from just over 45s. between 1560 and 1600 and £4 9s. 6d. between 1610 and 1640.⁶⁶ The declining purchase of forty shillings as a significant threshold from the mid-seventeenth century is suggested by the impressment bill of 1645, designed to generate recruits for the New Model Army, which exempted any man rated at £5 in goods or £3 in lands, and the hearth taxes of the later seventeenth century which exempted those with goods or property worth less than £10.⁶⁷ The minimum thresholds set by the church courts for ‘notable goods’ and the remission of court fees had also been reset to £5 by this time.⁶⁸

⁶² Some courts specified the higher sum of £5. Carson I. A. Ritchie, *The Ecclesiastical Courts of York* (Arbroath, 1956), pp. 74-5; Ralph Houlbrooke, *Church Courts and the People during the English Reformation 1520-1570* (Oxford, 1979), p. 51. For the remission of fees in practice, see Ronald A. Marchant, *The Church Under the Law: Justice, Administration and Discipline in the Diocese of York 1560-1640* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 229-231, 234.

⁶³ Jacqueline Bower, ‘Introduction to Probate Accounts’, in Peter Spufford (ed.), *Index to the Probate Accounts of England and Wales*, 2 vols (London, 1999), p. lvi.

⁶⁴ Craig Muldrew, ‘Rural Credit, Market Areas and Legal Institutions in the Countryside in England, 1550-1700’, in Christopher W. Brooks and Michael Lobban (eds.), *Communities and Courts in Britain 1150-1900* (London, 1997).

⁶⁵ Roger Schofield, *Taxation under the Early Tudors 1485-1547* (Oxford, 2004), ch. 5; M. J. Braddick, *Parliamentary Taxation in Seventeenth-Century England: Local Administration and Response* (Woodbridge, 1994), ch. 2.

⁶⁶ Alan Everitt, ‘Farm Labourers’, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 8 vols (Cambridge, 1967-2000), IV: 1560-1640, ed. Joan Thirsk, p. 421.

⁶⁷ Ian Gentles, *The New Model Army in England, Ireland and Scotland, 1645-1653* (Oxford, 1992), p. 31; Arkell, ‘The Incidence of Poverty’, p. 33.

⁶⁸ Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Testaments and Last Wills* (London, 1677), p. 354; Francis Clerke, *Praxis Francisci Clarke* (Dublin, 1666), p. 257.

The relative poverty of witnesses was carefully staked out, therefore, with reference to a range of signifiers of material hardship. Dependence on charity or relief was associated with the depths of destitution, placing recipients at the bottom of the hierarchy of indigence. Being without any certain place of abode, and dwelling separately from dependent family, further signalled the insufficiency of any livelihood such witnesses were able to glean (as well as the severe limits of neighbourly good will and parish relief). When wages were claimed, by hired and domestic servants as well as the increasing numbers of men and women more permanently dependent upon wage labour, they were deemed a haphazard source of the barest subsistence rather than a reliable asset. Returns on labour performed independently of the market economy also fell into the category of precarious maintenance rather than rewards worth accounting for. The lack or very limited possession of goods confessed to by the hundreds of witnesses stating they were worth little or nothing further denoted an absence of any material security for credit. Those who could claim nothing more than their clothes faced the extreme limits of their resources, especially if they were like Ann Richardson, with ‘scarce a Coate to her back’.⁶⁹ Those who had a few goods worth enumerating were better placed—such as a widow from the Isle of Thanet who in 1625 declared that ‘her Cheifest estate consisteth in houshold stuffe and in netts’ which she valued at forty shillings.⁷⁰ While forty shillings was rendered an ever more meagre value by inflationary trends, it is important not to underestimate the significance of this boundary, symbolising the possession of a basic reserve of goods which afforded a small foundation for credit and which may well have created a buffer between the owners and those who depended on nothing besides their labour, wages, patrons, or the parish for their maintenance. The history of consumption, primarily focused on the expanding world of luxuries and novelties, has been largely blind to the extent to which the accumulation and retention of the most simple stock of necessities (rarely worth inventorying) represented both a major achievement for the majority in early modern England and an important marker of difference amongst those of little or no worth.⁷¹

⁶⁹ GL, 9065A/7 (unpaginated), 27 Sept 1637.

⁷⁰ DCb/PRC 39/37, fo. 69^v [ID Canterbury 3349].

⁷¹ See, for example, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London, 1996); Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester, 1999).

II.

Turning from *how* witnesses of limited means described themselves to examine in more detail *who* represented themselves in these terms, further social and material connotations attached to these forms of description become evident. Table 1 provides an overview of the proportions of witnesses within different jurisdictions who declared themselves worth little or nothing or poor, or referred to their own receipt of alms in any form.⁷² The first column of figures outlines the total numbers of witnesses who were interrogated about their worth in each jurisdiction.⁷³ The second column lists the proportion of witnesses who answered that they were worth little or nothing (in all its variations), or poor, in response to the question of their worth. The third and fourth columns show the percentage of the total number of witnesses who described themselves or their spouse as poor or in receipt of alms respectively, either in the context of a statement of worth or in response to another interrogatory in the cause. The final column combines the proportions of witnesses responding that they were worth little or nothing or poor and those providing a monetary evaluation of their goods below the sum of forty shillings.

[Table 1 near here]

These figures confirm the rarity with which witnesses detailed a history of receiving relief across jurisdictions, with only 0.4% of the overall sample referring to their own or a spouse's collection of alms of any kind. Witnesses' own references to relief were entirely absent in the dioceses of York and Chester. Also striking is the

For recent exceptions, see Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darron Dean and Andrew Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, 2004); French, *Middle Sort*, ch. 3. Cf. Peter King, 'Pauper Inventories and the Material Lives of the Poor in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty*.

⁷² This table excludes material collected from the Diocese of Ely, the Bishop of London's Consistory Court, the Archdeaconry of Richmond, and various peculiars within the Diocese of Chichester on the grounds that either collection bias or the patchy survival of depositions has skewed the distribution of witness statements extracted from these jurisdictions.

⁷³ The variation between these figures primarily represents differences in the volume of business and only secondarily the incidence of the 'worth' question, with the exception of the diocese of Chester where the interrogatory enquiring about witnesses' worth was less frequently administered.

very limited deployment of the term ‘poor’ in the language of self-description when compared with the much larger proportions of witnesses who declared themselves worth less than forty shillings or worth little and nothing. This varied slightly more between jurisdictions, ranging from 5% of all the witnesses interrogated about their worth when examined in Salisbury and only 0.2% in York. The diocese of York was also unusual in having significantly lower proportions of witnesses declaring themselves worth little or nothing than other jurisdictions, which is partly attributable to the much higher percentage of witnesses providing monetary estimates of their worth.⁷⁴ This is illustrated by the inclusion of deponents who evaluated their goods below the forty shillings threshold which more than doubles the proportion of witnesses at York who can be counted as possessing limited means. The higher levels of variation between jurisdictions in the overall proportions of witnesses declaring themselves worth little or nothing or poor can also be explained by differing conventions governing the ways in which married women detailed their worth. Considerably higher numbers of wives examined in Canterbury, Cambridge, London, and Lewes responded that they were worth little or nothing or poor than in Salisbury, Chester or York. These imbalances are further compounded by the fact that wives made up far lower proportions of deponents in York, Chester and Salisbury than in all the other jurisdictions excepting the Archdeaconry of Lewes.⁷⁵

[Table 2 near here]

The propensity with which witnesses described themselves as worth little or nothing or poor was, therefore, heavily shaped by gender and marital status, as illustrated further by Table 2 which represents the entire sample of witness responses. Women declared themselves worth little or nothing at significantly higher rates than men, and also deployed the language of poverty with greater frequency. This trend was additionally shaped by marital status, details of which were recorded in the case of most female (but few male) deponents. Amongst married women expressions of limited or no worth were shaped as much by restricted *ownership* of goods as by the

⁷⁴ 87.4% of witnesses appearing in York gave a monetary estimate of their goods, compared with the overall average of 61.7% for the entire sample.

⁷⁵ As a proportion of all witnesses providing worth statements, married women comprised between 4.8% in York and 23.3% in the Bishop of London Commissary’s court. The overall percentages of women in the sample range from 10% in York to 40.1% in the London Commissary’s court.

lack of goods, owing to the influence of coverture. So the wife of a Cambridge mason responded in 1595 that she was ‘worthe notheinge of hir selfe for that she is a married woman & under covert baron’, and Anne Hilton from Acton (Cheshire) declared in 1613 that ‘shee is an other mans wief and hath notheinge of her owne proper goods’.⁷⁶ Such statements did not always preclude suggestions of means. Joan Harvell, married to a Sussex yeoman, responded in 1586 somewhat paradoxically that ‘she is...under covert barne & therefore nothing woorth because all that she hath is her husbands’.⁷⁷ Barbara Pentland, of Sandwich in Kent, declared in 1592 that ‘she is a married woman and her wealthe cometh from her husband having nothing of her owne but all at his government & disposicon’.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, it is clear that many wives’ responses principally referred to the scarcity of goods rather than an estate forfeited under coverture. The potential for ambiguity is illustrated by a Kentish wife’s response that ‘she is not worth any thinge havinge an husband who is a labouring man’.⁷⁹ Many married women declared themselves worth little or nothing without direct reference to their marital status or to coverture, and it is often not clear whether this signified hardship or the lack of ownership (or both). The several wives who referred to themselves or their husbands as ‘poor’ left less room for doubt. Joanna Browne, for example, responded in Canterbury in 1570 that she had a husband who was ‘a poore man’, living ‘only by his labor, & not worth (his detts payd) above xls. as she belevethe’, and Grace Ratcliffe, appearing before the Archdeaconry of Richmond in 1640, answered simply that ‘her husband is a poore labouringe man & worketh for daie wages where hee Can gett Worke’.⁸⁰ Married women’s declarations of being worth little or nothing therefore encompassed a range of meanings spanning, and sometimes combining, the dependence engendered by coverture and the material realities of poverty and hardship.

If married women’s declarations of little or no worth were heavily influenced by the legal doctrine of coverture, those of widows were more clearly a product of their relative privation. Widows claimed to be of little or no worth in lower proportions than other women (both married and single), but still in far higher proportions than men. While the higher frequency of monetary estimates of worth

⁷⁶ CUL, CUA, Comm.Ct.II.6, fo. 97 [ID Cambridge 106]; CRO, EDC 5(1613)/22 [ID Chester 289].

⁷⁷ WSRO, Ep II/5/4, fo. 17 [ID Chichester 85].

⁷⁸ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/14, fo. 113 [ID Canterbury 2358].

⁷⁹ CCA, DCb/J/X.11.12, fo. 105 [ID Canterbury 1190].

⁸⁰ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/6, fo. 64 [ID Canterbury 2222]; Lancashire Record Office, Preston [LRO], DRCH 20, on the will of William Lancaster [ID Chester 882].

provided by widows is suggestive of their relative financial autonomy compared with other women, widows' statements also disproportionately featured accounts of hardship. Many appeared thoroughly immersed in the economy of makeshifts, such as Joan Fowler who claimed in 1609 to be 'litle more worth then the clothes of her backe', getting her living by her 'handy labour'; or Ann Ensall who in 1623 claimed to get her living 'by winding of silk and making of buttons and anie other honest work that she cann doe to gett a peny'; or Maria Litchfield who subsisted by selling curds and cream in the summer and, in the winter, 'by crying Pease and Bacon about the streets', and who admitted in 1686 to being 'very little worth' while owing more than three quarter's rent in addition to a further twenty shillings.⁸¹ Widows described themselves as poor more regularly than other women, such as Rose Bigge, declaring in 1565 that 'she is a verie poore wydoo having a child upon hir hands wherbie she is litle or nothing worth in substance', describing a set of circumstances that became increasingly familiar to the distributors of poor relief over the course of the ensuing century.⁸² This is further illustrated by the comparative frequency with which widows referred to receiving alms—related not only to their greater likelihood to resort to relief than other groups, but also to its greater social acceptability in such cases.

Singlewomen's declarations of limited means were also disproportionately frequent compared with the rest of the sample—with over half of all singlewomen describing themselves in these terms—although they deployed the language of poverty with less frequency than other women, and none referred to receiving alms. The character of unmarried women's responses was determined by age as well as gender, since in many cases the lack of goods was a product of relative youth. Anne Beecking, a Kentish spinster aged 20, stated in 1640 that she was 'but a yonge wench...worth but little besides the Cloathes to her back', and Elizabeth Taylor, aged 28 in 1663, declared in Salisbury that 'she is a young woman and liveth by her service

⁸¹ WSRO, Ep II/5/8, fo. 108 [ID Chichester 393]; GL, 9189/1, fo. 76; 9065A/8, fo. 374^v [ID London 218].

⁸² CCA, DCb/PRC 39/5, fo. 27^v [ID Chichester 2202]. For the prevalence of widows amongst recipients of poor relief, see Tim Wales, 'Poverty, Poor Relief and the Life-Cycle: Some Evidence from Seventeenth-Century Norfolk', in Richard M. Smith (ed.), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984); Richard Smith, 'Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare: Reflections from Demographic and Family History', in Martin Daunt (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London, 1996); Pamela Sharpe, 'Survival Strategies and Stories: Poor Widows and Widowers in Early Industrial England', in Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (eds.), *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, 1999).

and is otherwise little or nothing worth'.⁸³ At 25, the mean age of singlewomen appearing as witnesses was considerably lower than the mean age of 38.2 for all women.⁸⁴ Table 3 confirms the link between statements of little or no worth and age. A far higher proportion of witnesses below the age of 35 supplied declarations of limited means or poverty. Amongst these the coupling of 'poor' and 'servant' occurred regularly, used as a form of self-description by young men as well as young women. George Easday, for example, stated in 1625 that he was worth nothing 'for that he is but a poore servant', and a Yorkshire spinster responded in 1663 that she was 'a poore servant & worth little save the Clothes on her back'.⁸⁵ The more ready adoption of the language of poverty by servants signalled their social subordination as much as their limited means and was indicative of a strong association between poverty and servility. These connotations of dependence were compounded by youth; those maintained by their parents were also represented as lacking means, although this was as often an issue of access as privation. So an 18 year-old 'blacksmith' responded to the question of his worth simply that he lived 'under his father' and had 'his meanes from him', a 23 year-old singlewoman declared that 'her dependance is on her Parents', and a 17 year-old 'yeoman' stated that 'he being but a youth is at altogether his frends allowance & goeth as yet to schoole neyther is he worth any thinge of his owne'.⁸⁶ Those launched on an independent path might also be discounted because of their youth, such as the plaintiff's husband in a testamentary dispute of 1576 who was described by one witness as 'but a yonge begynner and very poore...for that...he hadd but a very small store of howshold stuff'.⁸⁷

Some young people qualified their statements of little or no worth with an indication of future means, in order to signal that this was a temporary life-cycle phase rather than a permanent condition. Such claims to incipient status were made in anticipation of the death of a parent, the patronage of 'friends' or the transfer of a portion. A Kentish singlewoman, aged 19, described herself as a servant under her mother and responded that 'she is of her selfe lytle worthe, but if her mother please

⁸³ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/49, fo. 39 [ID Canterbury 604]; W&SRO, D1/42/58, fo. 31^v [ID Salisbury 1284].

⁸⁴ The mean age for men was 44.3.

⁸⁵ CCA, DCb/J/X.11.16, fo. 12^v [ID Canterbury 1560]; BI, CP.H.2445, Anne Mitchell c. Mary Mawde [ID York 1362].

⁸⁶ CCA, DCb/J/X.11.13, fo. 193^v [ID Canterbury 1299]; LMA, DL/C/242, fo. 248 [ID London 1400]; W&SRO, D1/42/12, fo. 77 [ID Salisbury 777].

⁸⁷ GL, 9065A/1a, fo. 185^v.

she may make her worthe an hundreth pounds'.⁸⁸ A Yorkshire wool man, aged 25, declared that he depended wholly upon his father for his employment and means, from whom he was expecting 'a competent porcion', adding 'yet for the present [he] is not worth any thing of himselfe'.⁸⁹ Such answers were not dissimilar to those of married women who claimed to be worth nothing of their own, depending for their maintenance upon their husbands. Rather than expressions of material *hardship*, these formulations of little or no worth stemmed from the links between social subordination and material *dependence*. Youth, therefore, could temporarily limit distinctions of social status. Yet those who were fortunate enough to expect some sort of inheritance or the preferment of friends, especially at the threshold of marriage and householding status, were on a very different course from others whose wages saved from service were all they had to depend on as the foundation for their adult lives.⁹⁰ In the case of the latter, survival would have been impossible without continued recourse to wage labour and the economy of makeshifts—and the closer mapping of dependence with hardship—into adult life.

Table 3 also shows a slight upturn in the proportions of witnesses of limited means towards the latter end of the life-cycle, and the language of poverty informed self-description with greater frequency amongst witnesses aged 55 and above than during the intervening phases of the life cycle. Higher proportions of older witnesses also referred to receiving alms of some kind. In a few cases, the lack of means was once again reflective of shifting access to goods and the dependence on others for maintenance rather than absolute hardship as a consequence of a retirement agreement. A 70 year-old Yorkshire husbandman claimed in 1636 that he had 'passed a good estate in goods & leases to his sonne, & hath onely reserved his finding out of the same for his life, soe that he hath little or nothing more', while in 1712 a Wiltshire tiler (aged 75) responded that 'he is maintained and during life is to be maintained by his son in consideration that he has made over his estate to his said son', adding that otherwise he was worth little or nothing.⁹¹ In most cases, however, expressions of limited worth amongst older witnesses were more clearly the product of the straitened

⁸⁸ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/7, fo. 13 [ID Canterbury 2244].

⁸⁹ BI, CP.H.1734, Grace Butterfeild c. Sybil Hargreaves [ID York 2028].

⁹⁰ Jane Whittle, 'Servants in Rural England c.1450-1650: Hired Work as a Means of Accumulating Wealth and Skills before Marriage', in Maria Ågren and Amy Louise Erickson (eds.), *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400-1900* (Aldershot, 2005).

⁹¹ BI, CP.H.2196, Marmaduke Dolman c. Peter Gunby [ID York 1252]; W&SRO, D1/42/67 (unpaginated), 27 Aug 1712 [ID Salisbury 1419].

circumstances that often accompanied old age.⁹² Some referred explicitly to reduced means, like William Slydle who, aged 70 in 1626, admitted that ‘heretofore he hath bin a man of good hability and hath payd to the parson of Rumboldsweeke...as much for Church dutyes and Tythes as any man in the parish for many yeaes together, but sayth that nowe he is but a poore man and lyttle woorth his debtes being payd’.⁹³ Others alluded to the increasing difficulties of eking a living, such as William Rayner who, aged 80 in 1623, described himself as ‘a verie poore man’ who got his living ‘by doeng anie husbandry work or other imployment as his yeres will permit him to do’, and Thomas Stainer who, aged 61 in 1686, responded that he was ‘decayed in his Estate & Limbs...and not soe well able to mainteyn himselfe by his Labour’.⁹⁴ In such statements old age was associated with the rapid diminution of resources and greater entanglement in webs of dependency and obligation. So John Key (aged 62) declared in 1631 that he ‘is now more indebted then his whole goods would satisfie’, and Richard Wilkinson (aged 60) claimed in 1604 that ‘every man having his own he is not worth the clothes uppon his backe’.⁹⁵

Despite formulating statements of worth in similar terms, older witnesses were nonetheless more likely to assert their independence than their younger counterparts.⁹⁶ A 70-year old Kentish husbandman responded to the question of his worth by valuing his goods at twenty shillings. When further pushed with an additional interrogatory he conceded that ‘he and his wife are poor yet with his labour and honest endeavour he makes shift to live and subsist without help or relief of either his neighbours or the parish except that at Christmas he has a share of what is given to the poor there by the minister and other charitable minded people of the parish’.⁹⁷ In several cases such as this, when witnesses admitted to receiving alms, they simultaneously stressed their ability to secure an independent living. So,

⁹² Margaret Pelling, ‘Old Age, Poverty, and Disability in Early Modern Norwich: Work, Remarriage, and other Expedients’, in Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith (eds.), *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991); Claire S. Schen, ‘Strategies of Poor Aged Women and Widows in Sixteenth-Century London’, in Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (eds.), *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* (Harlow, 2001); Lynn Botelho, ‘Aged and Impotent: Parish Relief of the Aged Poor in Early Modern Suffolk’, in Martin Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London, 1996); eadem, *Old Age*; Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁹³ WSRO, Ep III/5/2, fo. 24 [ID Chichester 1113].

⁹⁴ GL, 9189/1, fo. 67^v [ID London 913]; W&SRO, D1/42/60, fo. 119 [ID Salisbury 606].

⁹⁵ CRO, EDC 5(1631)/3, Sir William Brereton c. James Massie [ID Chester 488]; CUL, CUA, Comm.Ct.II.12, fo. 13^v [ID Cambridge 271].

⁹⁶ See also Thomas Sokoll, ‘Old Age in Poverty: The Record of Essex Pauper Letters, 1780-1834’, in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty*; Botelho, *Old Age*, ch. 3.

⁹⁷ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/46, fos. 121^v-122 [ID Canterbury 4377].

notwithstanding her age of 84, a widow of Fisherton Anger (Wiltshire) responded in 1594 that ‘shee is a poore old lame woman but shee liveth not by almes, and shee hath a small litle stock of money although not much to trade & live upon for her better relief’, adding, no doubt reluctantly, ‘yet shee saith that heretofore shee hath had *ixd.* of the poore mens box’.⁹⁸ Even in very advanced years, termed ‘decrepit old age’ in contemporary parlance, the stigma of dependence on the parish was assiduously repudiated.⁹⁹

The relative lack of means, indeed the self-proclaimed poverty, of women and servants and the young and old suggests very strong associations of being ‘poor’—particularly in the language of *self*-description—with social subordination and material dependence (on husbands, masters, parents, or adult children) as much as with material hardship. Limited access to goods was framed in terms of the reduced autonomy conferred by reliance on and obligation to others. Yet this selective use of the language of poverty to denote dependence also informed connotations of hardship derived from the limited ownership of goods, further restricting the possibility of claims to independence and autonomy by the labouring poor at any point in the life course.

III.

Where evidence survives of the ways in which deponents declaring a lack of means were more widely discussed by their co-witnesses, it is clear that the markers used to stake out gradations of poverty—the receipt of relief, the lack of goods (signified by having nothing besides wages or clothes), or the limited possession of goods—as well as the associations of poverty with social subordination could make witnesses of little or no worth highly vulnerable to discrediting techniques which easily collapsed their carefully drawn distinctions. Besides their lack of credit, the main concerns about such witnesses focused on their susceptibility to bribery and their dependence on others. Charges of dissolute living also appeared more regularly in relation to those of limited means than those with claims to some substance. The impression given by

⁹⁸ W&SRO, D1/42/12, fo. 44 [ID Salisbury 768].

⁹⁹ See, for example, William Vaughan, *Directions of Health, both Naturall and Artificiall* (London, 1617), p. 215; James Hart, *KAINIKH, Or the Diet of the Diseased* (London, 1633), p.12.

such assessments was that witnesses of little or no worth had little or no authority, could not be trusted, and did not warrant an autonomous voice in the process of providing testimony in court and, by implication, in the wider social and political arenas beyond.

Concerns about bribery were routinely articulated in relation to poorer witnesses betraying the common expectation that they could be and often were incited to forswear themselves. So, for example, in the Archbishop of York's consistory in 1564, one deponent was discredited by another as 'a verry poore man having little of his own proper goods and a Light personne and such a one as will not sticke for a little rewarde to be promised'. The witness in question, William Shut, had valued his goods at £4, but his co-witness claimed that Shut was 'not worth xls. of his owne clere goods', that he had only one cow and no sheep, and that he could barely afford the yearly rent of his holding, thereby raising doubts about the value of his word.¹⁰⁰ The simple calculation adopted in such cases was that the more limited a witness's worth, the more readily he or she could be bought. So a Sussex collier was portrayed in 1620 as a very poor and needy fellow 'of small or noe credit & such as...may be easily drawne to depose an untruth'.¹⁰¹ It was a common trope that poor men and women would swear anything for a pot or two of ale. During the later seventeenth century anxieties surfaced in London that some such men and women regularly sought a living by swearing falsely for others in return for rewards. William Griffin was described in 1673 by several of his co-witnesses as 'a very poore fellow' and a 'pitifull poore indigent Man', and 'such a one, who is commonly called an Affidavit Man', known as 'Captaine Puffe' because he 'will be cited to sweare anything for Mony'.¹⁰² Even if deponents of limited means were deemed honest by their co-witnesses, their words were often nonetheless accorded little significance or account. So an Essex carpenter was described in 1586 as 'a pore man & an honest one that kepethe a cowe or twoe [but] of noe greate accompte by reason of his povertie'.¹⁰³ The implication was that with little material worth he had little claim to authority; the value of his word as well as his worth was negligible.

¹⁰⁰ BI, CP.G.984, Johnson c. Dawson [ID York 79].

¹⁰¹ WSRO, Ep II/5/12, fo. 15^v. The witness in question declared himself worth little or nothing, Ep II/5/11 fo. 149^v [ID Chichester 558].

¹⁰² GL, 9065A/8, fos. 105, 108, 109^v. Griffin described himself as a surgeon and declared himself 'not worth much', fo. 101 [ID London 141].

¹⁰³ The witness in question valued his worth at £3. LMA, DL/C/213, fos. 23, 41 [ID London 1119].

More routinely the bottom end of the social hierarchy was elided with the depths of the moral hierarchy, and poverty was often readily linked to dishonesty. Many poorer witnesses were represented as susceptible to bribery not only because they could more easily be bought but also because they lacked the moral rectitude to resist. A particularly aggressive series of exceptions to certain witnesses appearing in a case before the York Court of High Commission adopted this strategy by enquiring whether two witnesses were ‘dronkerdes men of small wytt light persons and of noo credet emongst honest persons having noothing to live upon but there bare waige and suche persons as may easelie be corrupted for a litel money to depose an untreuthe’.¹⁰⁴ Poorer witnesses subject to accusations of dissolute living were regularly charged with drunkenness, stealing, idleness or lewdness, but the culture of the alehouse loomed largest. Co-witnesses of William Garret, a sailor from Stepney, disputed his claim to be worth forty or fifty pounds in 1623, describing him instead as ‘a poore & nedie fellowe and worth little or nothing’, with no certain place of abode, and ‘commonlie accompted of & amongst them that knowe him to be one that will forswear himself for 2 potts of beare’. He was additionally represented as ‘a common haunter & frequenter of Taverns & Alehouses aswell in the nighte as in the daie tyme’, as ‘outragious in cursing swearing & forswearing’, and as ‘an idle drunken fellowe’.¹⁰⁵ The deep association between poverty and the alehouse could be brought to bear on the trustworthiness of female as well as male witnesses. Some were vilified as unlicensed alehouse keepers—such as Katherine Pett who was deemed suspect for entertaining a disorderly company of gentlemen known as ‘the damned Crewe’—while others were charged with excessive drinking themselves, such as Godly Winston who was characterised as a ‘pot companion’ and much given to drinking, which ‘ungodly’ tendencies (as they were described) contravened the expectations bestowed by her first name.¹⁰⁶ There was sometimes a misogynist edge to the discounting of women witnesses in these terms. Judith Awdrye, the wife of a London compositor, was discredited in 1574 not only as a tippler, but also as ‘a woman of

¹⁰⁴ BI, HC.CP 1566/1, Edward Moore c. Sir Robert Slaven.

¹⁰⁵ GL, 9065A/5 (unpaginated), 14 Feb 1623 [ID London 596]. For contemporary anxieties about plebeian drinking culture, see Keith Wrightson, ‘Alehouses, Order and Reformation in Rural England, 1590-1660’, in Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Sussex, 1981); Peter Clark, ‘The Alehouse and the Alternative Society’, in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries. Essays in Seventeenth-Century History presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁰⁶ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/22, fo. 135; DCb/J/X.11.16, fo. 79.

small credyett & estimacion and such a woman as wilbe sone overcome and made to say whatsoever a man will have her say and assone she will denye it agayn', and 'a woman full of tytyle & such a one as for a pott of drinck will say what a man will have her to say'.¹⁰⁷

The relative poverty of certain deponents was probed not only because a lack of goods or credit denoted the limited value of a witness's testimony and his or her susceptibility to bribery, but also because the ties of dependence poverty entailed rendered such witnesses vulnerable to coercion. Wage earners could be deemed suspect both because of the strong association between labour and poverty, and because of their dependence upon employers. This logic was deployed to discredit the testimony of John Tanner, variously described as a bricklayer or mason, who in 1620 declared his goods worth the modest sum of twenty shillings when appearing in a case before the Archdeaconry of Lewes on behalf of the plaintiff, Robert Constable. A series of witnesses produced on behalf of Stephen Pentecost, Constable's opponent, claimed that Tanner was not to be trusted since he was principally dependent upon Constable for his living. According to one of Pentecost's witnesses, Tanner was 'a poore needy fellow' and, employed by and under Constable, accounted his servant, depending upon him for most of his maintenance. Another witness also described Tanner as a poor man who was set to work by Constable, receiving most of his means from him. Several agreed that Tanner would swear an untruth at Constable's behest. In this case, Constable retaliated with a series of exceptions to Pentecost's witnesses who were similarly denounced. The curate of Laughton, for example, described them as 'poor needy fellows of small or noe credit & such as...may be easily drawne to depose an untruth'. In the estimation of Constable's witnesses, Tanner was re-described as an honest and hardworking householder who lived by his trade and whose oath could be trusted.¹⁰⁸ Although the degree of dependency was open to debate, therefore, this case nonetheless illustrates its potency as a serious objection to a witness's authority.

This last example also illustrates the ease with which wage labour was conceived as service. Tanner's masonry work was described by one set of witnesses as his trade and the source of an independent living, and by another set as a form of

¹⁰⁷ LMA, DL/C/211/1, fos. 253, 255.

¹⁰⁸ WSRO, Ep II/5/11, fos. 146-149^v; Ep II/5/12, fos. 14^v-16^v. Tanner's estimate of his worth appears in Ep II/5/11, fo. 127 [ID Chichester 543].

service to Constable on which—and therefore on whom—he primarily depended. Similar conceptual blurring is suggested by the response of John Smallman in 1570 that he was a ‘labouring husbandman...woorthe nothing but that which he getteth bye his labor’, despite being described in the biographical preamble to his deposition as a domestic servant.¹⁰⁹ This may have been an attempt on Smallman’s part to claim greater independence than associated with service, since the testimony of servants was easily disparaged on account of their status. In another Canterbury suit, for example, two men (neither of whom described themselves as servants) were described by a co-witness as ‘poore men of small credit or estimation being but servants’.¹¹⁰ Of the witnesses who supplied details of their maintenance in addition to an occupational descriptor in the biographical preamble to their deposition, nearly fifteen per cent admitted to maintaining themselves by some sort of service only when directly questioned about how they got a living.

That wage-earning of any kind could be represented as a form of servitude and an insubstantial means of living meant that a distinction between labour and service was readily unheeded. The division between wage earning and vagrancy could also become indistinct, as suggested by the discussion of a Kentish labourer’s credit by his co-witnesses who deemed him ‘poor’ and of ‘noe wealth worth or creditt’. Some believed he was household servant to the plaintiff, while another stated that he was ‘a poor fellow yet no vagrant’.¹¹¹ When they were established, working relationships were comprehended in terms of debt and obligation, a situation often doubly compounded by the habitual payment of wages in arrears and the acceptance of labour in return for credit. A clothier, for example, admitted in 1625 that he was indebted for about fifteen shillings to the plaintiff on whose behalf he appeared as a witness, which sum he was ‘to worke out’ by day labour.¹¹²

A comparable set of concerns was raised in relation to witnesses who had resorted to charity, suggesting a broad continuum to concepts of dependence encompassing relief (both formal and informal) and waged employment. In this conceptual framework, providing work was constructed as a form of patronage

¹⁰⁹ CCA, DCb/J/X.10.13, fo. 41^v [ID Canterbury 644].

¹¹⁰ CCA, DCb/J/X.11.3, fo. 104. One valued his goods at 40s. and the other at 6s. 8d., fos. 49^v, 50 [IDs Canterbury 917, 918].

¹¹¹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/32, fos. 265^v-266^v, 277^v. Thomas Kempe, the labourer in question, estimated his worth at 10s., fo. 175 [ID Canterbury 2875].

¹¹² CCA, DCb/PRC 39/37, fo. 112^v. Several witnesses referred to wages owing by their employers. See also Muldrew and King, ‘Cash, Wages and the Economy of Makeshifts’.

benefiting the labourer rather than the employer—a situation no doubt compounded by the fact that parishes were enjoined by the poor laws to set any able bodied poor to work. Occasionally witnesses were at pains to establish the different degrees of dependence separating charity, service and contractual employment but these were readily obliterated by discrediting techniques. In response to an interrogatory that appears to have been formulated solely for him, the labourer Edward Ballard confessed that when he had been working for the defendant about a year previously in 1620, he ‘did take an old sack of his and did weare it or wrap it about his body to keepe him warme’, but emphasised that he ‘did not desire or beg the same of him, but...did worke the same out in doeing businesses & worke for him’.¹¹³ Such ties of obligation were expected to deter witnesses from telling the truth if it contravened the interests of their patron. Just as servants appearing on behalf of their masters or mistresses might be questioned about the extent to which they feared displeasing their employers, so recipients of charity were deemed likely to be impartial. A Kentish curate, for example, judged four of his parishioners likely to forswear themselves for reward ‘chiefly by reason of their greate poverty’ and their dependence upon the plaintiff’s husband for relief.¹¹⁴

Implicitly culpable in all this were the poorer witnesses deemed morally, socially or materially susceptible to corruption and coercion, rather than the employers, landlords, or patrons wielding the power to determine their actions.¹¹⁵ Witnesses of subordinate social position and limited means could be exposed to the enormous condescension of others. A Kentish yeoman, speaking in 1637 of his co-witness, a tailor’s wife, claimed that although she and her husband were accounted poor persons, he had never heard that they took alms, adding, however, that her husband talked ‘more then becomes him’.¹¹⁶ Despite being considered deserving of aid, the trustworthiness of those who did depend on formal relief was open to question. Thomas Fryer described himself in 1594 as ‘a very poore man’ living by his labour (with no mention of relief) but was described by others as depending for the most part on alms, having been granted licence to beg. More than one co-witness accordingly judged Fryer as ‘idle’ and another referred to a history of unruliness. The

¹¹³ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/35, fo. 38 [ID Canterbury 57].

¹¹⁴ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/30, fo. 54^v.

¹¹⁵ Andy Wood, ‘Subordination, Solidarity and the Limits of Popular Agency in a Yorkshire Valley, c.1596-1615’, *Past and Present*, 193 (2006), 41-72.

¹¹⁶ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/47, fo. 82^v. The witness in question stated that she was worth nothing because married, fo. 63 [ID Canterbury 4488].

latter continued that Fryer behaved himself ‘as other poor men do’ (without elaborating), adding that he did not think Fryer ‘so bad’ and had known a great many worse. Witnesses were divided over whether Fryer could be trusted to tell the truth.¹¹⁷ Lurking between the lines of such descriptions was the normative expectation that poverty should imbue deference alongside dependence and that both could be prejudicial to a case; yet any indication of independence of mind—such as talking too much—could also condemn a witness whose relative poverty apparently denied him or her the right to an opinion. There was little space for assertions of authority or social rank by those who deemed themselves or were deemed by others as poor.

The degree to which witnesses of limited means could counter such associations and uphold claims to relative position was limited. A few responded with sarcasm or humour. It is likely such sentiments underlay monetary estimates of worth amounting to no more than a few pence. A Sussex labourer in 1582 claimed to be worth one-and-a-half pence ‘or thereabouts’, while a Cambridge cooper declared in 1625 that he was not worth more than two pence.¹¹⁸ Three Canterbury witnesses believed themselves not worth a penny, another estimated his worth at ‘some threepence mighthapp’, and several others claimed no more than a groat, a few pence, or a shilling.¹¹⁹ It is possible that such responses were regretful acknowledgements of the extent to which the witnesses concerned were in debt. So a London girdler claimed in 1589 that ‘he is worth a cople of pence if everie burd had his fether’.¹²⁰ The response of John Selwyn, a Sussex husbandman, was more obviously laced with sarcasm when he stated that he was worth two pence ‘for carders and dycers be worth little or nothing’. This retort had been provoked by another interrogatory designed to discredit Selwyn and his wife, the gist of which was suggested by a co-witness’s statement that Selwyn sometimes played at cards and that his wife nursed the plaintiff’s child. Selwyn himself also admitted to playing cards or dice occasionally for a pot of beer or twelve pence in response to this question. In doing so, he portrayed a shilling as a minor stake, even though it may have represented the value

¹¹⁷ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/17, fo. 59 [ID Canterbury 2407]. For the discussion of Fryer (and other witnesses in this case) see fos. 61-64, 78, 136 and DCb/PRC 39/18, fos. 97^v-103.

¹¹⁸ WSRO, Ep II/5/2, fo. 60^v [ID Chichester 48]; CUL, CUA, V.C.Ct.II.22, fo. 172 [ID Cambridge 324].

¹¹⁹ CCA, DCb/J/X.11.1, fos. 224^v, 237^v [IDs Canterbury 859, 868]; DCb/J/X.11.13, fo. 287 [ID Canterbury 1335].

¹²⁰ LMA, DL/C/213, p. 575 [ID London 1186].

of a day or two's work.¹²¹ Sarcasm, humour, or possibly desperation shaped the reply of William Kingsford in Canterbury that with his debts paid he was worth 'just nothing save 2 or 3 children'.¹²²

That many anticipated the negative connotations of having little or no worth is suggested most obviously by their reluctance to use the language of poverty in the process of self-description. This is in stark contrast to its more ready deployment in other contexts such as petitions and protests, which pitched a far more socially inclusive 'poor' against the 'rich' and emphasised the entitlement of the former rather than the latter.¹²³ As a form of self-description in the church courts, the idiom of poverty was associated primarily with social subordination rather than moral prerogative. Some witnesses therefore sought to excuse their poverty by emphasising that their limited worth was the outcome of some unexpected hardship or disaster beyond their control. A Sussex husbandman declared in 1598 he was worth little 'havige had mischance of late by fire', while a Kentish yeoman explained in 1604 that he had 'lost all or most of his substance' when his sheep, grazing on marsh, had been lost to 'the overflowing or the breaking in of the sea', leaving him with nothing once his debts were paid.¹²⁴ Others complained of having been impoverished by a law suit or of losing everything by standing surety to an unreliable debtor. A husbandman appearing in Salisbury in 1678, aged 31, regretted that 'he had left him by his friends sixty pounds or thereabouts but was cheated of it when he was in his minority, and that he is little else worth but his dayly labour'.¹²⁵

Just as some witnesses attempted to avoid the stigma of taking alms, others sought to deflect associations of dependence with service and wage labour. A Kentish tailor, aged 24, claiming in 1630 that he did not know the worth of his goods, nonetheless stressed that he was not a journeyman 'but a Master workman, and hath wrought for himselfe & set others under him at worke these 2 or 3 yeares or thereabouts'.¹²⁶ A weaver appearing in Salisbury in 1596 confirmed that he often worked for the plaintiff Jerome Streete, but added that 'his livinge or maytenance doth

¹²¹ WSRO, Ep II/5/2, fo. 60 [ID Chichester 49].

¹²² CCA, DCb/PRC 39/38, fo. 64^v [ID Canterbury 3460].

¹²³ Andy Wood, "'Poore Men Woll Speke One Daye:": Plebeian Languages of Defence and Defiance in England, c.1520-1640', in Harris (ed.), *Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850*; Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), ch. 6.

¹²⁴ WSRO, Ep II/5/6, fo. 203^v [ID Chichester 230]; CCA, DCb/PRC 39/26, fo. 117 [ID Canterbury 1998].

¹²⁵ W&SRO, D5/22/17, fo. 19^v [ID Salisbury 1530].

¹²⁶ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/39, fo. 252 [ID Canterbury 3696].

not altogether depend upon the same Streete for he saieth that he this examine hath asmuch to live on in livinge as he the articulate Streete hath & that if he himself this examine did or should earne no money but from the said Streete he this examine might sterve for a livinge'.¹²⁷ A Berkshire husbandman, referring to his 'hard labour' in wool work and husbandry, similarly emphasised that while he sometimes worked for the plaintiff in the cause he did so not as a servant but 'at his owne pleasure'.¹²⁸

Several witnesses claimed status as householders responsible for maintaining a family. A married woman conceded in 1636 that she and her husband were 'but poore people', but insisted that they brought up their charges without parish relief. Her denial that she and her husband were overtaken with drink when they witnessed the defamatory words in dispute suggests attempts on the part of the opposing litigant to exploit associations of poverty and profligacy. Her husband, also appearing in the case, similarly justified his resorting to alehouses as 'for his honest necessity and to drinke with his neighbours and Customers there'.¹²⁹ Many emphasised their great painstaking in providing for themselves and others, explicitly claiming this as a source of honesty. A wheeler responded that he was 'a poore man and worth litle or nothing but laboreth as a trewe poor man getting his lyving from hand to mouth', while a widow declared that she was 'a poore woman but liveth in an honest way by her owne labour', with nothing else to maintain her.¹³⁰ Both these witnesses were quick to offset the language of poverty with a counterclaim to honesty, as were many others who professed to live honestly *in spite of* their lack of means. These were defensive strategies that anticipated the negative associations of limited means, but the range of attributes such witnesses might draw on to assert their honesty was far narrower than those able to claim substantial credit and status as tax payers, landholders, or office-holders.¹³¹ Principally, assertions of honesty amongst poorer witnesses emphasised painstaking industry and efforts to avoid dependence on the relief of others. Given this was liable to construction in terms of the dependence and deference associated with waged work or service, this was an extremely narrow foundation for claims to autonomy.

¹²⁷ W&SRO, D1/42/13, fo. 41^v [ID Salisbury 801].

¹²⁸ W&SRO, D1/41/4/29[47] (unpaginated) 4 April 1587 [ID Salisbury 919].

¹²⁹ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/43, fos 266^v-267.

¹³⁰ CCA, DCb/PRC 39/5, fo. 26^v [ID Canterbury 2201]; DCb/PRC 39/53, fo. 65^v [ID Canterbury 175].

¹³¹ See Alexandra Shepard, 'Honesty, Worth and Gender in Early Modern England', in Henry French and Jonathan Barry (eds.), *Identity and Agency in England, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke, 2004).

Very occasionally, a witness sought to overturn associations of material hardship with moral deficiency. A married woman declared in 1625 that she hoped she was ‘of as good credit in Sandwich as those that be farr her richer, or better in estate’. Similar sentiments were offered by two witnesses appearing in Salisbury in 1665 who declared that ‘a poor man may be an honest man as well as a rich man’.¹³² This logic could be extended by others as well as claimed by witnesses themselves. So a clothier stated that honest poor persons ‘make conscience of an oath legally taken as much as richer & wealthier persons’, but he nonetheless discounted three of his co-witnesses as ‘not only poore in estate but in honesty’ and unlikely to be ‘so chary of their soales health’ that they will respect an oath.¹³³ The fact that this warranted discussion, however, highlights the extent to which honesty and its related moral authority was assumed to reflect wealth and social status rather than understood in meritocratic terms. Other deponents laid claim more generally to a good reputation. A Yorkshire butcher in 1687 admitted to being ‘worth little or nothing his debts being paid, but values his reputacion’, while a Kentish husbandman stated in 1637, ‘true it is his estate is not much worth yet he lives in good and honest repute amongst his neighbours even those of the best fashion’.¹³⁴

These last responses suggest how important the opinion of neighbours—especially the ‘better sort’ of neighbours—was in authenticating claims to credit by those of limited means, which, by implication, could not be taken on the authority of such witnesses alone. In general discussions of a particular witness’s trustworthiness, the common estimation or, more exclusively, the opinion of the more substantial parishioners, was critical. Neighbours were sometimes willing to endorse the credit of a fellow witness, once again with reference to the narrow criteria of esteem to which they might lay claim—principally with reference to diligent industry. So Stephen Burridge, a husbandman, referred to several of his co-witnesses as ‘very poor, indigent & necessitous persons’, but added that he could say no more against them because they were all ‘painstakers & such as by their industry and labour indeavor themselves to live in the world in honest courses’.¹³⁵ Such endorsements might also serve as a caution against taking an overly pessimistic view of the constraints facing

¹³² CCA, DCb/PRC 39/38, fo. 88^v [ID Canterbury 3468]; W&SRO, D1/42/58, fos. 150^v, 151^v [IDs Salisbury 1302, 1303].

¹³³ CCA, DCb/J/X.11.16, fo. 88.

¹³⁴ BI, CP.H.5746, Dorothy Peckett c. Edward Peckett [ID York 1380]; CCA, DCb/PRC 39/43, fo. 323^v [ID Canterbury 4169].

¹³⁵ CCA, DCB/PRC 39/39, fo. 68.

witnesses of little or no worth. Litigants could be just as interested in underscoring the credit of their witnesses as disputing it, and in several cases where a witness's credit was more widely discussed, co-witnesses endorsed as well as discounted it, not least because the disputes heard by the church courts were often fought along vertical rather than horizontal fissures within communities.¹³⁶ However, poorer witnesses were more vulnerable than others to the discrediting strategies of litigants, and were more likely to be portrayed negatively than their wealthier counterparts. Although discrediting tactics were deployed in only a small minority of cases, witnesses declaring themselves worth little or nothing or poor, or less than forty shillings, were more than twice as likely to be discussed by their co-witnesses as witnesses declaring themselves worth more than forty shillings. In addition, in well over half (56.1%) the cases involving witnesses of limited means the deponents under discussion were represented in wholly negative terms, while only one fifth (20.3%) were portrayed in solely positive terms. By contrast, nearly two-fifths (38.9%) of witnesses declaring themselves worth more than forty shillings were positively endorsed without qualification—almost comparable in proportion to those described solely in negative terms (45.8%). There was also less disagreement about wealthier witnesses: only 15.3% of those discussed were portrayed in both positive and negative terms, whereas this occurred in 23.6% of cases involving deponents worth little or nothing or less than forty shillings. Although co-witnesses might disagree about whether a witness fell within or without the social boundaries demarcating the 'honest', it is clear that poorer witnesses were easier targets than their wealthier counterparts when it came to discrediting techniques, and that they exercised less control over their self-assertion in court. The negative ways in which the authority of such witnesses could be debated by others, as well as the lengths some witnesses went to qualify their declarations of limited worth, are illustrative of the potential barriers to their equal participation—and powers of self-validation—with those of more substance.

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¹³⁶ For a detailed case study, see Bernard Capp, 'Life, Love and Litigation: Sileby in the 1630s', *Past and Present*, 182 (2004), 55-83. See also Wood, 'Subordination, Solidarity and the Limits of Popular Agency'.

The relative poverty of witnesses was staked out with reference to a series of fine gradations of status extending all the way down the social scale, gauged in relation to the receipt of alms, the absence of a stable residence or living, the quality of clothes, dependence on wages, and a lack or the limited possession of goods. The concentration of the language of poverty as a form of self-description amongst women, servants, the young and the old compounded associations between poverty, dependence and social subordination. The negative connotations of poverty and dependence were more explicitly drawn when witnesses of limited means were discussed by others. Claims to honesty were justified with reference to hard work and the endorsement of neighbours, but they were just as often hedged with refutations of the negative associations between poverty and dishonesty. That there could be disagreement about the attributes assigned to individual witnesses suggest that these boundaries were fluid and open to varied interpretation, but the level of contest over the honesty of poorer witnesses confirms the extent to which contemporaries mapped the moral hierarchy onto the social hierarchy.

On the one hand, it might be argued that the church courts offered a forum in which significant numbers of those who could, in various ways, be described as ‘poor’ participated in the resolution (and sometimes the extension) of a wide range of disputes. These disputes were numerous and far from trivial. Witnesses were involved in establishing parish custom regarding the payment of tithes and church dues. They were drawn into disputes over the allocation of seats in church which involved the negotiation of local hierarchy. They were critical to the resolution of conflicts involving allegations of slander—many of which also revolved around competing claims to social status. The participation of witnesses facilitated the community policing of morals surrounding illicit sexual activity and they were also integral to the process of establishing paternity in cases of illegitimacy. It was on the basis of witness testimony that negligent or unorthodox clergy were disciplined, and, more routinely, the appraisal and distribution of the goods of the dead was monitored.¹³⁷ That one in three witnesses declared themselves worth forty shillings or less—widely

¹³⁷ For accounts of various aspects of the business of the church courts in early modern England, see Marchant, *The Church under the Law*; Houlbrooke, *Church Courts and the People*; Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987); Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996); Donald A. Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (Cambridge, 2000); Tom Arkell, Nesta Evans and Nigel Goose, *When Death do us Part: Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000).

claimed as the threshold of extremely limited means—or little or nothing or poor establishes the church courts as a comparatively inclusive arena for the participation of the relatively humble in disputes affecting local claims to status, the distribution of resources, and the traditions of local identity. All were integral to the ‘politics of the parish’, and such participation was also one of the means by which people of limited means were drawn into the processes of state formation associated with the vast expansion of litigation characteristic of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³⁸

On the other hand, the terms in which witnesses of limited means participated are suggestive of the extent to which their contribution was hedged with constraints and the degree to which the church courts functioned as a socially conservative arena. The vetting of deponents drew upon and reinforced associations of poverty, dependence and a lack of credit. This is immediately evident in the extent to which witnesses declaring themselves worth little or nothing avoided the language of poverty with reference to themselves, in contrast to the readiness with which it was deployed when discussing the credit of others. In York, for example, while only three witnesses described themselves as ‘poor’, a further 23 were labelled so by others. The more ready adoption of the vocabulary of poverty by young servants and women must have further compounded its association with social subordination and limited autonomy. But perhaps most constraining for the growing numbers becoming permanently dependent upon wages and the economy of makeshifts was the insignificance of their earnings as an asset. It was the exchange value moveable goods that provided an index for the evaluation of credit. Wages, by contrast, principally signalled dependence, debt and obligation, precluding claims to substance and autonomy.

Just as this circumscribed the social participation of those of limited means in early modern England, it also severely narrowed their opportunities to uphold an autonomous and positive sense of identity before the scrutiny of their better placed neighbours. Witnesses’ statements of worth confirm that labouring identities were forged not only in response to hostile material conditions, but also in a social context that afforded little conceptual distinction between labour and service, service and dependence, and dependence and poverty. Besides connotations of dependence, poverty was also readily associated with idleness and dissolute living—most often

¹³⁸ Keith Wrightson, ‘The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England’, in Griffiths, Fox and Hindle (eds.), *Experience of Authority*; Braddick, *State Formation*, ch. 4.

with reference to the culture of the alehouse. While labouring men and women did not view themselves in these terms, emphasising their honesty, painstaking, and self-sufficiency, it is clear from their defensive strategies of self-description that they anticipated these negative associations between labour and the absence of autonomy and integrity. Although objections to poorer witnesses only occurred in a minority of cases, it is clear that for this category of witness, the language of self-description did not always constitute the language of self-determination. It is perhaps unsurprising that they were scarcely deemed 'free', even by the standards of some of the most radical agitators for widened political participation of the Leveller movement in the 1640s. The evidence presented here, therefore, supports the more pessimistic appraisal of Leveller attempts to extend the franchise recently reiterated by Quentin Skinner, but does so from the perspective of the material and social basis of concepts of dependence rather than the ideological connotations of freedom.¹³⁹ It also confirms the narrowness of the available conceptual space within which labouring people might 'negotiate the terms of their subordination', recently emphasised by Andy Wood.¹⁴⁰ The ever more arduous task of subsistence in early modern England was accompanied by another set of labours, associated with the difficulties of asserting an autonomous identity. This appears to have been as much a Herculean task as sustaining a living.

¹³⁹ Skinner, 'Rethinking Political Liberty'.

¹⁴⁰ Wood, 'Subordination, Solidarity and the Limits of Popular Agency'. See also idem, 'Fear, Hatred and the Hidden Injuries of Class'.

Table 1. Proportions of witnesses describing themselves worth less than forty shillings, or little, nothing or poor, or referring to their receipt of alms, by jurisdiction

	<i>Total number of witnesses</i>	<i>% describing themselves as worth little, nothing, or poor</i>	<i>% describing themselves or their spouse as poor</i>	<i>% referring to their own or their spouse's receipt of alms</i>	<i>% worth <40s., or little, nothing, or poor</i>
Diocese of Canterbury, 1560-1697	4,703	23.9	2.0	0.6	29.5
Diocese of Salisbury, 1566-1720	2,193	18.0	5.0	0.4	20.5
London Commissary's Court, 1562-1728	902	17.7	1.8	0.6	20.9
Archdeaconry of Lewes, 1580-1692	927	17.5	1.1	0.2	23.3
Diocese of Chester, 1591-1675	739	15.0	3.4	0.1	19.1
Cambridge University Courts, 1581-1680	619	13.4	3.7	0.0	16.4
Diocese of York, 1550-1690	2,052	5.2	0.2	0.0	11.9
TOTAL	12,135	17.7	2.3	0.4	22.4

Table 2. Witnesses describing themselves as worth little or nothing, or poor, or in receipt of alms, by gender and marital status

	<i>% describing themselves as worth little, nothing, or poor</i>	<i>% describing themselves or their spouse as poor</i>	<i>% referring to their own or their spouse's receipt of alms</i>
Men	10.4	1.6	0.2
Women (all)	41.1	4.9	0.6
Singlewomen	51.2	2.9	0.0
Wives	39.9	4.0	0.5
Widows	32.6	7.9	1.6

Table 3. Witnesses describing themselves as worth little or nothing, or poor, or in receipt of alms, by age

<u>Age range</u>	<i>% describing themselves as worth little, nothing, or poor</i>	<i>% describing themselves or their spouse as poor</i>	<i>% referring to their own or their spouse's receipt of alms</i>
15-24	39.3	2.9	0.1
25-34	20.3	2.6	0.1
35-44	14.2	1.7	0.2
45-54	13.1	2.0	0.3
55-64	11.4	2.7	0.7
65+	12.6	2.3	1.1